



Louis Bonaparte's balancing act

The 18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte

In the following part of Marx's outline of the events from "The 18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte" (see the attached files, or click on the links below for downloads containing a longer selection) it is clear that the proletariat suffered a disaster in Paris in June of 1848, when it had no allies and was isolated and attacked by all the other classes together, and massacred.

This is the isolation that the proletariat must always avoid, and it is one reason why the working class must always have allies. Here is the brief quotation:

“a. May 4 to June 25, 1848. Struggle of all classes against the proletariat. Defeat of the proletariat in the June days.

“b. June 25 to December 10, 1848. Dictatorship of the pure bourgeois republicans. Drafting of the constitution. Proclamation of a state of siege in Paris. The bourgeois dictatorship set aside on December 10 by the election of Bonaparte as President.”

In the “18th Brumaire” the contenders of the Great French Revolution reappear, namely the Aristocracy, the Peasantry (known as the *Montagne* – the “Mountain”), the Bourgeoisie and the working Proletariat.

Also described are the serious contradictions within the bourgeois class; the classless, manipulative Bonaparte, who played the four main classes off against each other for more than two decades, until he lost the plot; and the “*lumpen-proletariat*” (proletariat-in-rags) of idle adventurers who were Bonaparte’s willing accomplices, paid with “whisky and sausages”.

Juggling the different class interests and playing the different classes against each other, as Louis Bonaparte did for twenty years or so, is what has ever since then been called “Bonapartism”. Thabo Mbeki managed his juggling act for only ten years. In Swaziland, the trick has been sustained for more than four times as long as that. In all three cases the main beneficiary of the interlude turned out to be the bourgeois class.

Here are four more of the most well-known paragraphs included in our selection from the “18th Brumaire”. They reveal a lot of the class dynamics that Marx describes in this classic work:

*“Only under the second Bonaparte does the state seem to have made itself completely independent. The state machinery has so strengthened itself vis-a-vis civil society that the Chief of the Society of December 10 [Louis Bonaparte] suffices for its head — an adventurer dropped in from abroad, raised on the shoulders of a drunken soldiery which he bought with **whisky and sausages** and to which he has to keep throwing more sausages. Hence the low-spirited despair, the feeling of monstrous humiliation and degradation that oppresses the breast of France and makes her gasp. She feels dishonored.*

“And yet the state power is not suspended in the air. Bonaparte represented a class, and the most numerous class of French society at that, the small-holding peasants.

“Just as the Bourbons were the dynasty of the big landed property and the Orleans the dynasty of money, so the Bonapartes are the dynasty of the peasants, that is, the French masses. The chosen of the peasantry is not the Bonaparte who submitted to the bourgeois parliament but the Bonaparte who dismissed the bourgeois parliament. For three years the towns had succeeded in falsifying the meaning of the December 10 election and in cheating the peasants out of the restoration of the Empire. The election of December 10, 1848, has been

consummated only by the coup d'état of December 2, 1851. [i.e. when Louis Bonaparte made himself Emperor.]

*“The small-holding peasants form an enormous mass whose members live in similar conditions but without entering into manifold relations with each other. Their mode of production isolates them from one another instead of bringing them into mutual intercourse. The isolation is furthered by France's poor means of communication and the poverty of the peasants. Their field of production, the small holding, permits no division of labor in its cultivation, no application of science, and therefore no multifariousness of development, no diversity of talent, no wealth of social relationships. Each individual peasant family is almost self-sufficient, directly produces most of its consumer needs, and thus acquires its means of life more through an exchange with nature than in intercourse with society. A small holding, the peasant and his family; beside it another small holding, another peasant and another family. A few score of these constitute a village, and a few score villages constitute a department. Thus the great mass of the French nation is formed by the simple addition of homonymous magnitudes, much as potatoes in a sack form **a sack of potatoes**. Insofar as millions of families live under conditions of existence that separate their mode of life, their interests, and their culture from those of the other classes, and put them in hostile opposition to the latter, they form a class. Insofar as there is merely a local interconnection among these small-holding peasants, and the identity of their interests forms no community, no*

*national bond, and no political organization among them, they do not constitute a class. They are therefore incapable of asserting their class interest in their own name, whether through a parliament or a convention. They cannot represent themselves, they must be represented. **Their representative must at the same time appear as their master**, as an authority over them, an unlimited governmental power which protects them from the other classes and sends them rain and sunshine from above. The political influence of the small-holding peasants, therefore, finds its final expression in the executive power which subordinates society to itself.”*

This is the dictatorship that the peasantry, time and again, brings upon itself. The alternative to it is the dictatorship of the proletariat. The working class must supply the organising framework that the peasantry cannot produce for itself.

- The above is to introduce the original reading-text: [The 18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte, Chapter 1 and part of 6, and Chapter 7, Marx.](#)
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